

INL News Release
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Regional youth learn, play and win scholarships at INL sponsored Physics Day

IDAHO FALLS -- On May 15, several thousand high school and middle school students from Idaho, Utah, Wyoming and Nevada will enjoy the 20th annual Physics Day, sponsored by Utah State University and Idaho National Laboratory, at Lagoon theme park near Farmington, Utah.

Terms like “conservation of energy” and “rotational mechanics” have kept nearly 100,000 high-school and middle-school students screaming with delight for an entire day since the first event was held. Last year, more than 6,000 students and teachers from regional high schools and middle schools attended Physics Day.

“The purpose of [Physics Day] is to make the amusement park a physics lab,” said Ali Siahpush, a mechanical engineer and research scientist at INL. Siahpush helps to coordinate the event and has worked on the activity since its very beginning. Using things like homemade accelerometers, students learn the physics behind the rides using workbooks they are provided, all while enjoying the park’s exciting rides and a day outside.

“[Physics Day] lets them see that it’s more than just a textbook problem,” said Randy Waite, a physics teacher at Hillcrest High School in Idaho Falls. Waite, who has previously attended Physics Day with his students, said, “It’s a good eye-opener that helps them look at Lagoon from a physics standpoint.”

Students also have a chance to engage their creativity and knowledge by participating in a large variety of competitions with prizes awarded for each competition. Last year’s prizes were estimated to be worth nearly \$155,000. Event planners say that prize amounts for this year’s activity will be even higher.

For example, students on the winning team in the Physics Bowl competition will each receive a full-tuition scholarship to Utah State University. Other competitions include designing a theme park ride based on physics principles, designing a logo that will be used on the T-shirts for next year’s Physics Day event, and the personal favorite of Siahpush, the “Sky-drop.”

The Sky-drop involves students designing a container in which they place an egg that they then drop from a moving chair lift aiming to hit a target on the ground. Scores are given based on the durability of the egg and the accuracy of the drop, as well as container weight.

Siahpush explained that he enjoys this and the other activities so much because, in contrast to what can often happen in a classroom lecture, here the students, “are smiling when they’re learning ... they’re having fun and they’re learning at the same time.”

This year former astronaut Don Lind will talk to the students at lunch on Friday. He is an emeritus professor of physics at USU.

Other sponsors of the event include: APS Physics, Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center, Boeing, ATK Launch Systems, Hill Aerospace Museum, IM Flash Technologies, Micron, MOOG, NASA Idaho Space Grant Consortium, Rocky Mountain NASA Space Grant Consortium, North Wind, Pasco, Portage Environmental, PTC, SAIC, S&S WorldWide Inc., U.S. Navy, Utah State University Admissions, Utah State University Bookstore, Utah State University College of Science, Utah State University Physics Department, and the Space Dynamics Laboratory of Utah State University.

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